

## MORAL LEADERSHIP IN POST-SECULAR AMERICA

By Richard John Neuhaus

*Richard John Neuhaus was born in Canada and educated in Ontario, Nebraska, and Texas. He holds degrees from Concordia Theological Seminary, Washington University, and Wayne State University. Ordained in 1960, he was from 1961 to 1977 head pastor of the Church of St. John the Evangelist, a low-income, mainly black and Hispanic parish in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn. He now pursues his several ministries as "Pastor on Assignment" for the East Coast Synod of the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches, as editor of Forum Letter, a monthly commentary on religion and culture, and as a Senior Fellow of the Council on Religion and International Affairs.*

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When we set out to talk about moral and religious leadership in post-secular America, we are facing certain perennial questions, questions that are not going to go away until, if the Christian gospel turns out to be right, the Kingdom of God comes.

Jesus talked about rendering to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's. Paul talks in Romans 13 about the powers that be, and more negatively in other places about the principalities and powers that stand against the rulership of God. Likewise with Augustine, Innocent III and all of the controversies between the Popes and Emperors during the Holy Roman Empire, Thomas Aquinas, Luther, Calvin's grandly flawed experiment in Geneva—all the



way up to today's debate about *Roe vs. Wade* and abortion, about prayer in public schools, about tax exemption and what is meant by religion for purposes of the IRS.

It was thought until very recently, by the cultural leadership of the Western world, that these issues had been resolved in some way—basically by excluding religion or religiously-based morality from the public arena, where the serious business of society was taken care of. The idea of the separation of church and state, which most of us have taken in with our mother's milk, has by remarkable convolutions of logic and law come to mean in the minds of many people the separation of religiously-based values from public policy. But the period is now past when it was assumed that these issues could be resolved simply by removing one side of the debate from the public square. We are entering a new period in which we are asked to read the signs of

im•pri•mis (im-pry-mis) adv. In the first place. Middle English, from Latin *in primis*, among the first (things)....

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the times in a different way, recognizing that in some very profound sense we are entering a post-secular world.

This has all kinds of ramifications. It will affect not only American life, but also—if America is, as some people allege, the advance society of world history, if what is happening in the United States today is what is likely to be happening elsewhere tomorrow—then the post-secular character of American society tells us something about the likely prospects of world-historical change.

Thus we find ourselves back in what is for most intellectuals today an unfamiliar cluster of questions, but one which within the broader range of our country's history has been most characteristic of American thought: namely, the role of America in the world, the idea that in some sense America represents something new, both promising and ominous, about the future of humankind. That certainly was the basic belief of the constitutional founders and, even more important, of the religious and spiritual and poetic visionaries at the beginning of the American experiment.

This attitude toward America as being experimental, as being provocative, as being a test of human possibility, has almost totally been lost. It has been driven out of public discourse in recent American history, so that now it almost sounds quaint, like a nostalgic throwback to a time long ago, back to a period of innocence before Vietnam and the Second World War and Auschwitz. It seems difficult now to envision a world in which the American proposition would once again be something of promise in a world-historical context; yet I think that that is the kind of world which we may now be entering. A time is coming in which we will have to make some decisions, not simply at a pragmatic or economic level, but much more solemn and daring decisions about what we think history is about.

Politics, I would argue, is always a function of culture, and at the heart of culture is religion. Our culture consists of those symbols, those ideas, those stories which inform the way we try to shape our lives together. It is those values we hold up, those sometimes intuitive, sometimes articulate notions of what is honorable and what is base. It is our notions of excellence. And at the heart of all such cultural assumptions, are ultimately beliefs about what is true. Whether we call them religious or not, whether they have a denominational brand name pegged to them, they *are* religious in character—in that they engage our intuitions about the absolute, about that which transcends all possible discussions of simple utility or pragmatism. When we ask what it is that really this world of ours is all about, and whether indeed there is finally any kind of meaning, we are dealing with religion.

Today, the role of religion in public has changed very dramatically, because of the recent outburst of what is called the religious New Right, the Moral Majority, Christian action groups of all sorts. And in many people's minds—especially people who have been brought up to believe that the separation of church and state means the separation of public business from religiously-based values—this movement is viewed as a kind of invasion of the barbarians, of the people who were once presumably locked into their cages way back in the 1920s during the famous "Monkey Trial," with H. L. Mencken's acid caricaturing of these fundamentalist Neanderthals.

So now the question many people in "respectable" circles are asking is, how do we get these animals back in their cages, these people who are disrupting the way in which we have decided to conduct our business in public? Well, my premise is that they are not animals, they are citizens of this Republic; and for those of us who are Christians, they are recognized as sisters and brothers in Christ. They are new and vital participants in the always raucous process of democratic government. In fact, it may even be that Jerry Falwell and the Moral Majority have kicked a sort of tripwire—rather clumsily, perhaps inadvertently, sometimes perhaps even with an element of malice—a tripwire alerting us to a much more massive change. That massive change is, if I may put this rather ambitious proposition to you, the collapse of the 200-year hegemony of the secular Enlightenment.

### The Naked Public Square

The cultural and, therefore, political elites of our society have for the last 200 years assumed that the dogmas of a secular Enlightenment ought to prevail as the formative influence in how we shape our public discourse. Those dogmas were distinctly hostile to particularist religious belief. It was assumed, coming out of the more militant secularism of the late eighteenth century in France, that enlightenment (which is to say, education) is incompatible with religious belief, and hence that as people become more enlightened they will become less religious. Religion will wither away, or will at least be confined to the private sphere of life. This is the basic model which not only militant secularists, but also a good many religionists, have bought into. Our century is plagued by this notion that somehow what one does religiously is a private negotiation between oneself and God, hermetically sealed off from public discourse about questions of right and wrong in the *agora*, in the public square.

Thus we have ended up, as a consequence of the secular Enlightenment, with the idea of the naked public square—that is, the public space, in terms of the governmental process, legislative, executive, judicial, but also in terms of a mere physical and psychological



space that we call public—the idea that all of this space ought to be sterilized of any specific religious influence. At one relatively trivial level, but nonetheless important if one thinks about it, the issue of the naked public square arises every year around Christmas time. As sure as the date itself, there are lawsuits with groups like ACLU and Americans United for Separation of Church and State joining in to make sure that that Christmas tree isn't put in the town square, or that Christmas carols are not sung in the public school. This is merely symbolic of a much more profound assumption: that somehow it is possible to take care of all the public business without any reference to the religiously-based values of the American people.

Now the idea of hermetically sealing religion off from the political process is not without its understandable historical roots. Coming out of the seventeenth-century wars of religion, in which the post-Reformation conflicts between various religious partisan groups almost destroyed the civil fabric of Europe, it is understandable that it was assumed that religion in public is, by definition, divisive and destructive and that it therefore must be kept out of the public square or we will end up in perpetual civil war. Yet it is obvious today that the notion of a secularized, religiously sterilized public space is no longer believable.

Not only in the area of religion and politics, but in so many other areas, the hegemony of the secular Enlightenment no longer seems very plausible. In our law schools today, for example, there is a refreshing upsurge in ethical questions—not simply in terms of how you stay out of trouble with the law, but in a more profound sense of what are the issues of right and wrong which make law legitimate and illegitimate; what finally are the values that give force to law, beyond simply the mechanistic notion of precedent or the relativistic notion of that which serves the several interests in conflict.

The collapse of the secular hegemony is equally evident in the sciences. Especially in physics, but also in biology and a whole host of fields, people are realizing that science is not the solving of problems so much as it is an encounter with mysteries which are to be revered. We are hearing that somehow there is an absolute mystery at the center of it all, which when serious scientists talk about it sounds more and more like theology.

In a whole host of endeavors, then, the cutting edge is moving toward an understanding of a religious character in the nature of the reality of which we are part. Certainly this is true in the realm of public policy and in the political process. We need, in the phrase of sociologist Peter Berger, an understanding that we live "under a sacred canopy." At one time secularism itself, with all of its very noble and frequently compelling visions of human progress, provided a sort of sacred canopy for many of the intellectual and cultural

leaders of the Western world. Today it doesn't, as we realize that we can only become more mature persons not by outgrowing mystery but by entering ever deeper into the mystery.

Fifteen years ago, sociologists of religion and of culture would almost all assert that as society became more modern, it would inevitably become more secular. Today many of those same sociologists, scholars like Peter Berger, Clifford Gertz, Daniel Bell and other neo-conservatives, have done a 180-degree turn and are suggesting that as we move further into modernity the role of religion will become not less but more important. As we move deeper into what Max Weber called "the iron cage" of a specialized and rationalized society, the irrepressible question about the meaning of it all, the religious question, will come increasingly to the fore.

There are other reasons as well why the new assertiveness of religion in public portends a different kind of future for American politics and social change. One major reason is, quite simply, that the United States is a democracy, which means that if governance is not always of, by, and for the people, it is at least not in contempt toward the people. And the fact is that in American life, the overwhelming majority of the people understand their values to be inseparably connected with their religious belief. Observers from other societies have often seen it more clearly than have American social critics, but the sociological evidence is there even if one has very little power of perception: for better or for worse, Americans are incorrigibly religious. You can list for yourself all the ways in which our understandings of what is right and wrong, of good and bad, of that which gives reason for hope, are tied to particularist religious beliefs—primarily, of course, Christianity and Judaism.

This is why it is not possible for public policy to go on acting indifferently toward the religiously-based values of the people in whose name the democracy presumably has moral legitimacy. Take for example the most heated issue in American life today, one that unavoidably joins religiously-based values and public policy: the issue of abortion. In the *Roe vs. Wade* decision of 1973, Justice Blackmun, writing for the majority, acknowledged correctly the solemnity and the centrality of the issue joined: who belongs to the human community for which we accept common responsibility? Or in Biblical language, who is my neighbor?

The reason why *Roe vs. Wade* has been repudiated by the American people, and why it will eventually be turned around, is that for the first time in American jurisprudence, it was explicitly stated that it is possible to address these issues of ultimate importance without any reference to the Judeo-Christian tradition that has always been the primary source of public values in America. The strength of the religious New Right, which I find a very troubling phenomenon in many

ways, is positive to the extent it has alerted us that the direction pointed by *Roe vs. Wade* is no longer possible, not unless we as a society are willing to enter deeper and deeper into what sociological jargon calls a legitimation crisis—a situation in which governance is divorced from morality, in which law is asserted as law simply because it is the law.

**Toward a Theonomous Society**

The great task of our time, then, is to develop a new kind of public ethic that is able to engage the ultimate questions, that is able to be responsive in a democratic way to the juices of belief among the people. The only alternative is a legitimation crisis in which, in Hannah Arendt's phrase, we no longer have governance that represents authority, but governance that represents only power and that can only be continued by the use of increasing doses of coercion. That is where we are headed unless we can begin to talk again about ultimate values in public.

I am not referring to the kind of formulas which the religious New Right often seems to suggest, where you go straight from a Bible passage to the enactment of a piece of legislation. That would imply going back to a pre-Enlightenment situation or even to a pre-Reformation situation, back to some kind of unified Christendom, which is just not possible today. This task of constructing a new public ethic, informed by the living beliefs of the American people, will have to be a post-Enlightenment adventure. It will be a quite new chapter, an experience that will have internalized all of the Enlightenment's great contributions with regard to critical reason, all of its criticism of authoritarianism in various forms, so as to suggest a new way of recognizing what is authoritative.

It will mean that we have moved, in Paul Tillich's phrase, from the heteronomous society that existed prior to the modern age—a society in which one is ruled by others in an authoritarian way, you do what you are supposed to do because I say so or the Bible says so or the Church says so or the King says so—through an autonomous society—the great notion of the secular Enlightenment, of every individual being his or her own Pope, own Bible, own King, the kind of society which has brought us to our present impasse culturally and politically and morally—to achieve, at last, a *theonomous* society, a society that recognizes transcendent values by which it is held accountable.

As late as 1954 the phrase "under God" was put into the Pledge of Allegiance: "one nation under God." Some people find that phrase distressing, because they think it suggests that America is somehow immune from the sins and the ambiguities, the compromises and the crimes of other nations. Well, if that's what Americans mean when they say "under God," then it's indeed unfortunate that the phrase is there. But I would urge you to consider that it is a great

thing that it is there if we understand "under God" to mean under *judgment*. To be under God in this sense is to acknowledge that there is an absolute to which we are historically held accountable. Moral leadership in America, from the Mayflower Compact way back in the beginning of the seventeenth century right down to Dr. King's August 28, 1963, "I Have A Dream" speech at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, has always conveyed that sense of historical destiny. It is that sense of historical destiny, of calling, of vocation, of accountability, of purpose, of intent, of testing, of experiment, which I think is required if we are to reconstruct a public ethic.

Historically in the United States it was the Puritan tradition that gave most vigorous expression to that sense of destiny. If you look at American religion today, there are a number of churches that are the heirs of the Puritan tradition, the churches that ordinarily are called mainline Protestantism. The United Methodist Church, the United Presbyterian Church, the Protestant Episcopal Church in America, the United Church of Christ—these are the churches that accepted, up until the middle of this century, the culture-forming task which Puritanism saw as its vocation for America. But today the Protestant mainline has, I believe, largely abdicated its culture-forming task, thereby raising the issue of which new religiously-based communities of moral leadership will provide the kind of moral vision that is required for the reconstruction of a public ethic.

There are many other candidates; the brand-name Protestant churches in America are not in fact, numerically speaking, the mainline at all. The largest single Christian community in the United States, of course, is Roman Catholic, of whom there are roughly 50 million; they are not part of the so-called mainline. Another 20 million Americans claim they are Lutheran, and the majority of these are in no way part of the mainline either. There are approximately 30 million, some would say as many as 50 million, under the broad banner of Evangelicalism and they are not mainline. And obviously the Jews and the Eastern Orthodox are not mainline Protestant. The so-called mainline majority is, in fact, the minority.

**Is America a Force for Good?**

Vilfredo Pareto, an Italian social theorist at the beginning of this century, had a little theory which he called the circulation of elites. He said that in any society you have a certain number of functions that need to be taken care of: military, economic, cultural, religious, artistic, and so forth. Each of these functions, Pareto said, gathers around itself an elite—people who by an old-boy network, by family connection, from one generation to another, lead the definition of the task relative to that function. But eventually, he says, an elite will weary of its function, or lose its confidence, or lose touch, so that it drops away and



a new elite then circulates to that function and begins to take over.

Today in the United States the religiously-based moral leadership of the country is witnessing a very vigorous contest in the circulation of elites. The moment obviously calls for a new community of leadership, a community that can give religiously-based moral definition to the American experiment and thus lay the groundwork for the reconstruction of a public ethic. To a lot of people it is very frightening to hear someone talk this way. They say, you're talking about Christian America, aren't you? Yes—yes, I am. The extraordinary thing is that today it is thought un-American to talk about Christian America.

Up until 1931 the U.S. Supreme Court itself could say, without any fear of contradiction, that of course this is a Christian society, and it could tick off the points of reference which make that characterization meaningful. But it is all different now. Really the idea that the belief systems of a people, especially in a democracy, ought *not* to inform and shape the way in which we construct our life together is a very novel idea indeed—and, I think, a very bankrupt one. We are not talking about imposing a belief system, but rather about resisting the imposition of alien belief systems that impose themselves under the guise of being value-neutral and value-free, when in fact they are laden with all kinds of values which are alien to the beliefs, the dreams, the convictions of the American people.

Throughout American history, certainly as recently as the late nineteenth century and the early part of this century, the great religious leaders of the Social Gospel movement, like Washington Gladden, Rauschenbush, and the rest, had no doubt but what their goal was to Americanize Christianity and to Christianize America. They had no doubt about this being an experiment not only in politics and in economics, but also in culture—the carrying forth of a heritage which was the merger of Greek classicism and Judeo-Christian faith. Whereas today, mainline Protestant religion has largely succumbed to the illusions of the secular society. It is no longer thought to be possible nor even desirable to exert a distinctively Christian influence within the public square. Thus in the World Council of Churches, for example, a slogan that has dominated for the last 15 years has been, "The world sets the agenda for the Church." You look around to see what, by *secular* definition, is happening in the world and then assume that it is the business of the church to advance that, to get on that bandwagon.

That kind of loss of nerve is at the heart of the collapse of the influence of mainline Protestantism. These are the churches that are in the doldrums, the churches that are not growing, the churches that are in institutional trouble, out of touch with their own constituencies, running all kinds of "church and society" programs, issuing pronouncements on every conceivable

public subject, but without any believable connection to the distinctive truth-claims of the Christian faith. It is a vast disillusionment with the American experiment that has led to this loss of nerve, this abject accommodationism, this retreat from being distinctively Christian, even distinctively religious, in public.

I have taken a little survey, unscientific but nonetheless I think reliable. I have asked people in the world of 475 Riverside Drive, the National Council of Churches and so forth, that if you put a certain proposition to the middle- and upper-level leadership of mainline Protestantism in America, what would their response be? The proposition is this: That on balance and considering the alternatives, American power is a force for good in the world. *On balance and considering the alternatives, American power is a force for good in the world.* A rather carefully nuanced proposition, I would say. The response I have found has been almost unanimous, that if one put that question to the middle- and upper-level leadership of mainline Protestantism in America today, probably less than 15%, at the most 20%, would say yes, that is true. Probably 50% or more would flatly say no, that the contrary is true. And the rest would so equivocate in their answer that in effect they too would be saying no.

### To Dream Anew

Now what does this tell us? It doesn't tell us that they are necessarily wrong; I think they're wrong and I suspect most of you think they're wrong, for I believe that America *is*, on balance and considering the alternatives, a force for good in the world. But it does tell us that whether they're right or wrong, they clearly are not in a position any more to provide cultural definition for the American experiment. Dr. Martin Luther King, with whom I worked for several years back in the '60s as a liaison between his SCLC and various parts of the anti-war movement, was fond of saying that whom you would change, you must first love. In a sense it's very simple; any good parent or teacher or pastor knows that. People are not going to take their sense of direction from their declared enemies. It is not at all obvious that the National Council of Churches loves America. Indeed, it is rather manifest that their posture is basically one of hostility, a posture that clearly excludes them as a candidate for providing cultural leadership.

There are other groups in America who obviously are prepared to do it. For one, the whole religious New Right. I do not think that they are going to win in Pareto's game. I hope that they are not, or that if the forces they represent do come to dominate the public discussion of religiously-based values, certain of their characteristics will have moderated by that time.

There are other contenders, the Roman Catholic Church perhaps first of all. Certainly in many ways this ought to be the Catholic moment in America, the

moment in which Catholics with their rich intellectual tradition, with a heritage of conceptualization about the relationship between the city of man and the city of God, are in a position finally to play a culture-forming role that in the past, because of anti-Catholicism on the part of Protestants and because of their own immigrant-based insecurities, they have not been able to play. I do not know whether indeed the Catholic Church will rise to that challenge. It seems to me that the leadership sectors within the Roman Catholic Church are today Americanizing themselves in a pattern that is in many ways imitative of the mainline Protestantism that is already struck out. But theoretically, it could be the Catholic moment, for Catholics up to now have been at bat, so to speak, in shaping American culture.

Lutherans have not been at bat. Their experience again is very similar to the Catholic immigrant experience, but without the conceptual riches and without the theological equipment, quite frankly, for dealing with the issues posed by a democratic society. On another front, I would say that the great issues posed by Calvinism, by John Calvin's grandly flawed experiment in Geneva, also hold a great deal of promise in the so-called evangelical churches. I am very impressed that today, if one moves around the United States asking where are the people and where are the communities that are really posing first-principle questions about the meaning of modern society, the relationship of God and the Republic, the nature of social legitimation in the modern world, a surprising number of people who are probing these issues with intelligence

and imagination call themselves Calvinists.

The Jewish community in America also plays a vital role in the possible reconstruction of a public ethic. I think it was generally agreed in the leadership circles of American Jewry, somewhere back in the 1930s, that the more secular the society, the safer it would be for Jews and other minorities. Today within the Jewish community, led by organs such as *The Public Interest* and *Commentary*, by figures such as Daniel Bell and Irving Kristol, that basic decision is being re-thought. The question is being raised whether the naked public square isn't a very dangerous place after all. For when the public square is really naked, when there are no transcendent sanctions of either a positive or a negative nature, then what finally are your protections against evil, including the evil of anti-Semitism?

This discussion of moral leadership has ranged far afield, all of it in search of rediscovering what John Courtney Murray, a great Roman Catholic theologian and political philosopher, called *the American proposition*—the audacity, the freshness, the almost unbelievable *chutzpah*, that is the United States of America. Revivifying what is unique about this kind of polity, this kind of democratic aspiration, revitalizing it and dreaming it anew, it seems to me is the great and invigorating challenge of our generation and of the generations to come. For I do believe that it is not with embarrassment, but with a profound sense of accountability to the transcendent judgment of God, that we can say it remains true today that this America, this proposition, this experiment, is the last best hope of earth.

### Hillsdale's 'Counterpoint' TV Series Starts August 4 Debate - Documentary Show to Run on WTBS Cable



Harrington

Free-market economist Walter Williams will debate socialist author Michael Harrington on the question of economic opportunity in America, Wednesday evening, August 4, 1982, at 9:05 pm EDT over WTBS cable television nationwide. George Roche, President of Hillsdale College, will moderate the debate.

The program, entitled "Counterpoint," is the first in a regular series produced by Hillsdale's new outreach division, the Shavano Institute for National Leadership. During the hour, Williams and Harrington will each present a short documentary film specially produced to argue his side of the issue; then they will face off in a live debate before Turner Broadcasting's potential audience of over 18 million homes coast to coast. It's an evening *Imprimis* readers won't want to miss.



Williams

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